

California State Archives
State Government Oral History Program

Oral History Interview

with

NELL SOTO

Pomona City Councilman, 1987 -
Spouse of California State Assemblyman Philip L. Soto

July 12 and August 25, 1988
Pomona, California

By Carlos Vásquez
Oral History Program
University of California, Los Angeles

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None.

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PREFACE

On September 25, 1985, Governor George Deukmejian signed into law A.B. 2104 (Chapter 965 of the Statutes of 1985). This legislation established, under the administration of the California State Archives, a State Government Oral History Program "to provide through the use of oral history a continuing documentation of state policy development as reflected in California's legislative and executive history."

The following interview is one of a series of oral histories undertaken for inclusion in the state program. These interviews offer insights into the actual workings of both the legislative and executive processes and policy mechanisms. They also offer an increased understanding of the men and women who create legislation and implement state policy. Further, they provide an overview of issue development in California state government and of how both the legislative and executive branches of government deal with issues and problems facing the state.

Interviewees are chosen primarily on the basis of their contributions to and influence on the policy process of the state of California. They include members of the legislative and executive branches of the state government as well as legislative staff, advocates, members of the media, and other people who played significant roles in specific issue areas of major and continuing importance to California.

By authorizing the California State Archives to work cooperatively with oral history units at California colleges and universities to conduct interviews, this program is structured to take advantage of the resources and expertise in oral history available through California's several institutionally based programs.

Participating as cooperating institutions in the State Government Oral History Program are:

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California State University, Fullerton

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Center for California Studies
California State University, Sacramento

Oral History Program
Claremont Graduate School

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University of California, Berkeley

Oral History Program
University of California, Los Angeles

The establishment of the California State Archives State Government Oral History Program marks one of the most significant commitments made by any state toward the preservation and documentation of its governmental history. It supplements the often fragmentary historical written record by adding an organized primary source, enriching the historical information available on given topics and allowing for more thorough historical analysis. As such, the program, through the preservation and publication of interviews such as the one which follows, will be of lasting value to current and future generations of scholars, citizens and leaders.

John F. Burns
State Archivist

July 27, 1988

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Interviewer/Editor:

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Science]
Ph.D. candidate, UCLA [History]

Interview Time and Place:

July 12, 1988
Soto's home in Pomona, California
Session of one and three-quarters hours

August 25, 1988
Soto's home in Pomona, California
Session of one hour

Editing

Vásquez checked the verbatim manuscript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spellings, and verified proper names. Insertions by the editor are bracketed. The interviewer also prepared the introductory materials.

Mrs. Soto reviewed a copy of the edited transcript and returned it with minor corrections.

Papers

There exist no private papers which the interviewer was able to consult for this interview.

Tapes and Interview Records

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives at UCLA along with the records relating to the interview. Master tapes are preserved at the California State Archives.

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Nell Soto was born on June 18, 1926, in Pomona, California. The descendant of families that go back seven generations in Pomona, Mrs. Soto attended local public schools and Mount San Antonio Community College. She has also studied at various universities in Southern California.

She married Philip Lewis Soto in 1949 and they have six children: Philip Anthony, Robert Lewis, Michael Martin, Patrick Jeffrey, Anna Maria, and Thomas Leopold. She was active in the political campaigns of her husband when he successfully ran for the La Puente City Council in 1958 and for the California State Assembly (Fiftieth Assembly District) in 1962 and 1964. She participated in the development of strategy for these campaigns and in the electioneering and fund-raising efforts. She also helped develop basic ideas for much of the legislation her husband carried during his tenure in the assembly.

In 1987, Mrs. Soto was elected to the Pomona City Council and has served under the only female mayor in the city's history, Donna Smith. She is presently employed as a community affairs representative for the Southern California Rapid Transit District.

[Session 1, July 12, 1988]

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

VASQUEZ: Mrs. Soto, could you tell me about your background, your life history?

SOTO: I was born [Manuela Ovalia García] in Pomona, California, in June of 1926. I went to school here [in Pomona] and went to Mount San Antonio [Community] College on and off. I even went as recently as a couple of years ago, because I love education. I've gone to Chapman [College] and [California State University] Cal State [Los Angeles]. I've [earned] a lot of [academic] units all over California, but I don't have a degree because of family responsibilities.

VASQUEZ: Where did you go to grammar school and high school?

SOTO: Here in Pomona. In the old days, when people were very poor, they moved around a lot. I went to two grammar schools. One was [Alexander] Hamilton Elementary School, and the other was [Louis A.] Alcott [Elementary School]. From there, I went to

Fremont Junior High [School], from the seventh to the tenth grade, and then to Pomona High [School]. When the war [World War II] broke out, many of us went to work. When the war ended, I came back and went back to school and got my G.E.D. [General Equivalency Diploma] at Mount San Antonio College.

VASQUEZ: Where did you work during the war?

SOTO: I worked at a factory that made boxes for bombs.

VASQUEZ: Here in Pomona?

SOTO: Yes. It was here.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember the name of that company?

SOTO: Martin [Brothers] Box [Company]. I worked there for several years until the war ended and then went back to school. I went to Mount San Antonio College. I was one of the first women. Mount San Antonio College was [then called] Mount San Antonio Junior College.

When the war started, there had been a junior college in Pomona called Pomona Junior College. It was run out of the Pomona High School building. They closed it down when the war started. Most of the young men who were in the eleventh or twelfth grade enlisted and went to war. A lot of the women went to help in the war effort. We all

felt very patriotic. Where Mount San Antonio [College] is now located there was an army bivouac station. They used to bring them [recruits] there for preparation.

As soon as the war was over it became a community junior college. A lot of the G.I.'s who came back from the war just went back and enrolled at Mount San Antonio [College]. A lot of us had never gone on to higher education, so we went to school there. That was quite an experience because Mount San Antonio, if you see it now, is a beautiful college campus. In those days it was in army barracks on dirt hills. We had to climb through mud and rain to get to the barracks to our classes, but it was fun.

VASQUEZ: What kind of subjects were you most interested in when you went to junior college?

SOTO: Business, mostly business. I took business classes, as most girls did in those days.

VASQUEZ: Why?

SOTO: Everybody thought you ought to be a secretary.
[Laughter]

VASQUEZ: What aspirations did you have?

SOTO: I just thought it was a good idea to study. I

love English. I took a lot of English classes and typing and all the office procedures, everything a nice girl does to work in an office. Something I never used, by the way. But I did use my English. I love to write. I still go back and take English classes. I take a lot of writing classes. I love writing and English and things like that.

VASQUEZ: You come from an old family here in Pomona, don't you?

SOTO: Right.

VASQUEZ: Will you tell me about your family?

SOTO: I'm a sixth or seventh-generation Pomonan. I don't know which, but my dad always said we were seventh generation. I've gone back and counted, but he must have known.

VASQUEZ: What was your father's name?

SOTO: Robert Louis García.

VASQUEZ: And your mother?

SOTO: Florinda Valenzuela García.

VASQUEZ: What did your father do?

SOTO: He was a truck driver. He loved driving a truck. He always had a truck or else he always drove a truck. So I'm a truck driver's daughter. I call

myself that because I love to drive. Throughout the years, even in the depression, he always seemed to be able to get a job driving a truck. He used to haul hay for one of the old-timers here, Joe Loubett.

He [father] came from one of the old families in Pomona. His mother [Viviana] was an Acosta, from the Acosta land-grant people in Santa Barbara. My grandfather [Antonio Marta García] was from the Palomares and Yorba and Veja people who got the land grants here in Pomona. My great-great-great-grandmother [Nelli García] was a García who married into the Palomareses and Vejars. Some of them are buried here in the historical cemetery [Palomares Cemetery]. My great-grandfather [Forestino García] was born here, and so on, all the way back.

VASQUEZ: What was Pomona like when you were growing up?

SOTO: What I remember about Pomona was that it was a very quiet city. The poor people lived on the south side of the tracks. . . . Do you want to hear this?

VASQUEZ: Yes, of course.

SOTO: The haves lived on the north side of Holt

[Avenue] and the have-nots lived on the south side of Holt. Holt is one of the main streets and runs east and west. What always stands out in my mind is that my dad, being a descendant of one of the founding families, should have been treated with a little more dignity.

But there was so much prejudice that if you had brown skin or a Spanish surname, there was a lot of prejudice. At the time it wasn't noticed that there was prejudice. It was just understood that the [Mexican] people here became sort of like the servants, the peons. They picked the oranges and the lemons. The "settlers," as they called them, were the Anglos who bought the land, cultivated it, planted oranges, and became very successful citrus growers. The people who lived in Pomona who were Hispanic and had come here in the late 1700s and early 1800s became the labor force. They're the ones who harvested the oranges and lemons. On the outskirts of Pomona and in Chino there was a great agricultural industry. A lot of people from Pomona worked in the fields in Chino.

VASQUEZ: When you say discrimination wasn't noticed, by

whom was it not noticed?

SOTO: The Anglos.

VASQUEZ: Did you notice it?

SOTO: Oh, yes.

VASQUEZ: Was there discussion? Was there ever any organization?

SOTO: Well, it was a discussion to the degree where my mother wouldn't allow us to go to the swimming pool. We're now trying to build a regular, beautiful [municipal] swimming pool. Some people don't like to admit to this--that is, people who are old-timers in Pomona--but Mexicans were not allowed to live on the north side of town.

VASQUEZ: There were restrictive covenants in the selling of homes?

SOTO: There wasn't any [legal] segregation, it was sort of de facto segregation. It wasn't anything that was written. It was just understood that you lived in a certain part of town if you were Mexican. They didn't recognize that you were Spanish, like my dad was. His great-grandmother was from Spain. They didn't recognize it. They didn't really care, and I don't think the dignity that was owed him was given. But he didn't seem

to mind. He just went on his way and didn't need them for anything. He just didn't get in their way. My mother never allowed us to be humiliated in that manner. She would say, "No, you don't go there, because you're not wanted. You're not going to go there."

VASQUEZ: Why were you not wanted at the swimming pool?

SOTO: Because we were "Mexicans" even though we were considered Spanish by my parents. They had only one day in which Mexicans could swim.

VASQUEZ: What day was that?

SOTO: I don't remember if it was Monday or Friday, but on that day the pool would be cleaned out at night. Then the Anglo kids would swim. If there was a Mexican child who didn't know the rules and went there, they would just chase him away. "No, Mexicans aren't allowed in here." The same way in the theaters. There were a lot of places where they wouldn't allow Mexicans. They didn't hire any Hispanics on Second Street until the end of the war.

VASQUEZ: What is Second Street?

SOTO: Second Street was where the main shopping [district] used to be. I was one of the first

Hispanics to go to work on Second Street.

VASQUEZ: What was it you worked as?

SOTO: I worked as a salesgirl.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember the name of the store?

SOTO: National Dollar Store. I'll never forget it, because the man had the courage to give me a job.

VASQUEZ: What year would this be?

SOTO: It must have been 1943 or '44, towards the end of the war. There were only maybe two of us Mexican/Hispanic girls working on Second Street. At the time my mother used to tell us, "Don't let anybody tell you that you're not as good as anybody else. You go out there and you look for a job. You make them see that you're smart and you can do the job." She never really let us believe that we were less than anybody else because we were Hispanic/Mexicans.

And she used to say, "You're not Mexicans. You just have to remember that. You're not Mexicans as in 'came from Mexico.' You're Spaniards like your father is. You have to remember that." My dad was very proud of the fact that he was a Spaniard, a pioneer-native rather than a Mexican. Because he was a Spaniard. But my mother came from Tecate, Baja California. She was very proud

of the fact. I could never see myself saying, "I'm Spanish." I always said, "I'm a Mexican." I didn't see the difference.

VASQUEZ: Now, when the war came along and you went to work in the defense industries, was the composition there pretty reflective of the society? That is to say, was there discrimination there too?

SOTO: In the factory that I worked in in Pomona, there were a lot of Mexican girls from school who went to work there. And there were some Anglos.

VASQUEZ: Was there any pay differential?

SOTO: No. Not that I knew of. Even my mother worked there, because they needed it. One thing happened which I think is very significant. It's not written in history books, but I think it should be. We moved to the outskirts of Pomona one day, because in those old days, when you were poor, you just kept moving. You moved around a lot.

VASQUEZ: Why was that?

SOTO: Because you just sometimes couldn't afford to pay the rent. You would go two or three months without paying your rent and get evicted. You'd go find another house for rent. You didn't need a first or last month's rent. You would just

need a few dollars and you could move in.

We moved to the outskirts of Pomona towards Chino. The Chino school was closer than the Pomona school, so my mother took my little brother and sister there. I didn't want to go there because I was already in high school and wanted to go to Pomona. My mother took the kids to Chino. The schools were segregated. There wasn't any covenant, as you call it, or de facto [segregation]. It was blatant.

She took them to the Anglo school [Chino High School]. The principal told my mother that her children couldn't go there because they were Mexicans. She asked, "Why? My children are Americans." He said, "No. No, they're Mexicans and they can't go here." She said, "Okay, will a bullet go around my son should he go into the service? Since he's a Mexican, is the bullet going to go around him?" She said, "I want you to answer that. He's an American. He's going to be fighting for his country. Is a bullet going to go around him? Or is it going to stop with him just like it does with the other kids?"

VASQUEZ: What answer did she get?

SOTO: Nothing. He let the kids in.

VASQUEZ: Is that right?

SOTO: Yes. So I used to tell my mother afterwards, during the days of the civil rights movement and everything that was going on, I'd say, "Mom, you don't even realize that you were a pioneer in integration, because of what happened in Little Rock [Arkansas] and so forth."

VASQUEZ: Is your mother still alive?

SOTO: No. But I used to tell her that. I said, "You know, you were probably one of the first people that had the nerve to stand up to people who were segregating children." I wish that somebody would have been there to record that, because it was very significant around here. Nobody had the nerve to stand up to those people. And she did. She called him a dirty name. She said [whispers], "You sonuvabitch, is a bullet going to go around my son?"

VASQUEZ: You're a city councilwoman, and I know you've been very active in community affairs. Where did you get your social awareness or your interest in social and political matters when you were growing up?

SOTO: Well, I think my mother, for one, in the conversations that we had. But a lot of it, I think, came from my interest in history and reading in school. I'm really interested in the history of our country. I don't know what drove me to become interested, I just am.

VASQUEZ: Are there any figures in American history that especially interest you?

SOTO: I don't know a lot about them, but I know enough to know that they were outstanding Americans and that because of them our history has taken the shape that it has. I am a great admirer of Thomas Jefferson. I wish that I knew more things about him that I could quote. I've read a lot of his quotes, but I'm not very good at retaining quotes and sayings as some people are. I have just read a lot of history.

VASQUEZ: Are there any women figures that you're especially fond of when you read, any female authors?

SOTO: Not particularly. I'm very fond of the memory of Eleanor Roosevelt. If that sounds corny, that's nevertheless the truth. I believe that people are not solely women or men, I think of people mostly as persons. I think a person can make a

difference, whether a man or a woman. I've never really felt less than any man. My mother taught us girls to do everything a man could do. We worked out in the fields, we drove a truck, we pitched hay. She taught my brothers to do everything a woman should do, clean the house and all those things.

VASQUEZ: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

SOTO: I have two brothers and two sisters. I was the middle kid.

VASQUEZ: What are your brothers' names and your sisters' names?

SOTO: One of them was William Randolph, who's dead.

VASQUEZ: William Randolph García.

SOTO: And I have a brother Richard [Reginald García]. And I have a sister Vicky.

VASQUEZ: Is that Victoria?

SOTO: Victoria.

VASQUEZ: What is her middle name?

SOTO: Well, she was Victoria Maxine García, but now she's Victoria García Quesada. And I have a little sister, Virginia Jean [García Corrasco]. Little sister, she's fifty years old now.

VASQUEZ: Who was William Randolph García named after?

SOTO: I don't know. My dad just loved the name William Randolph. They were really fun parents, my parents.

VASQUEZ: In what sense?

SOTO: In the sense that we were so poor but always used to laugh at situations. We always had a good time laughing.

VASQUEZ: Was it a close family?

SOTO: Yes. And how poor we were. We still did things and read and talked. I remember that my dad used to be a Republican, but he voted for [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt. I don't know why he was a Republican, other than because he was a Spaniard, and all Spaniards were Republicans in those days, I guess. It just came down to that. His brother lived to be ninety-five, and he died last year and still was a Republican.

VASQUEZ: What was his name?

SOTO: Roland C. García. I don't remember what the C stood for. Ninety-five years old. Anyway, my dad lived until he was eighty-three or eighty-four. It was funny, because my dad and my brother were pals. We used to be his pals, not his kids but his pals. It was a fun life because we used

to laugh at everything. No matter what happened, we would make fun of things that happened to us. Being so poor, it didn't really matter.

VASQUEZ: Who was the disciplinarian in the family?

SOTO: My mother. My dad was a marshmallow. He was so great.

VASQUEZ: Who kept the house? I mean, who ran the house basically?

SOTO: My mother.

VASQUEZ: Your father was gone a lot?

SOTO: Well, he drove a truck. There was a four-year difference between me and my older sister.

[Laughter] Anyway, I was telling you that I never felt that I did something because I was a woman, if that can be understood. I just felt that if I thought I could do something, I went ahead and did it.

VASQUEZ: When did you first start getting involved in community affairs or things outside of the home, things outside of just a social life?

SOTO: Oh, before I was married, my mother used to send me to the PTA [Parent Teachers Association] meetings for my little brother and sister, so I was interested then. I'd stand up and talk and

ask questions of the teachers to see how they were doing. And when I was at Mount San Antonio College, I started a Democratic club, the Young Democrats.

VASQUEZ: What year would this be?

SOTO: Gosh. I don't know. It was in the late forties.

VASQUEZ: Did you ever get involved in any of the political campaigns of the day?

SOTO: My first vote was for Harry [S] Truman. As I said, I couldn't understand why my dad was a Republican, because he had voted for Roosevelt. I remember the day that Roosevelt was elected. I must have been five or six years old. But he [my father] never voted Republican again.

VASQUEZ: Since Roosevelt?

SOTO: Since Roosevelt.

VASQUEZ: Not even for [Dwight D.] Eisenhower?

SOTO: No, never. Never voted Republican again. And he used to cuss-out Republicans.

VASQUEZ: What was it he saw as negative about Republicans at that time?

SOTO: The fact that [President Herbert C.] Hoover just really did him in, you know. [Laughter]

VASQUEZ: So your first vote was for Truman. And you were

an organizing member of a Democratic club at Mount San Antonio College?

SOTO: Yes. I don't even know if it's recorded, it's been so long. But it was very short-lived, because I got busy, met my husband [Philip L. Soto], and got married.

VASQUEZ: Was there anyone in that club that you remember who may still be involved in politics?

SOTO: No. I remember a lot of the people, but I've never run into them again. It's really funny. I think about it.

VASQUEZ: Was it primarily men or women?

SOTO: Primarily girls, women.

VASQUEZ: Was there resentment on the part of the men?

SOTO: I didn't notice it if there was.

VASQUEZ: What kind of activities did you engage in?

SOTO: At that time?

VASQUEZ: As a Democratic club, did you walk precincts?

SOTO: That's what we did for Harry Truman.

VASQUEZ: But not local candidates?

SOTO: No, no local ones. I didn't get involved in local politics until later. I worked for Harry Truman in 1948. Then I got married in 1949. That was the end of my involvement until about 1956 when I

worked for [Governor] Adlai [E.] Stevenson.

VASQUEZ: You worked for Adlai Stevenson?

SOTO: Yes.

VASQUEZ: The second time he ran for president?

SOTO: The first time around.

VASQUEZ: Once you got married, you stopped some of your activities for a while?

SOTO: Yeah. I had a couple of kids. And then I got active again when we moved to La Puente. I've always been interested in politics. I don't know where it started or where it came from. In school, I used to help people get elected. I never ran for anything myself, but I used to help people get elected to student government. I used to be the one that said, "Why don't you do this?" and kind of set strategy for them. If there was a play, I'd audition for it. I was the only Mexican that would audition for a play, let's say, the only Mexican in my class that would get involved in student activities, because our people here in Pomona were very passive.

VASQUEZ: What was La Puente like in 1949?

SOTO: In 1949 I didn't live in La Puente, I lived here. I got married here and went to live in Los

Angeles. I lived in Los Angeles from 1949 to 1956, almost seven years. We bought a house in La Puente. The year that we moved to La Puente, they were campaigning for [city] incorporation, and we got involved a little bit in that incorporation. That was around June 1956. That year was the Adlai Stevenson campaign. I guess it was the second one. I had voted for him the first time. That was '52, I guess. And then, in '56, I got involved because I got the fever again. There was a candidate running for Congress by the name of John [G.] Sobieski, who I thought had a terrific philosophy.¹

VASQUEZ: What was it about his philosophy that you liked?

SOTO: Well, he was very social-minded. Everything that's happened since, John used to talk about: liberal affirmative action, all the things that have come about, fair housing, equality in jobs for minorities, all of those things.

You asked me where I got my philosophy or what started me thinking. I guess it was mostly

1. Sobieski lost in the 1956 general election to Patrick J. Hillings in the Twenty-fifth Congressional District.

from talking to teachers, making speeches in class, and picking subjects that would always have something to do with social issues and unjust things. I don't know why that came up, whether it was my mother's conversations, things that happened to us, things that happened in Pomona, or what.

I started out being very social-minded, very very adamant on social issues. Sobieski was talking in those days about a lot of things that have now come about through legislation.

VASQUEZ: He was running for Congress?

SOTO: He was running for Congress. And, of course, he lost. Stevenson ran, and so forth. I went on from there. I really got involved in the [John F.] Kennedy campaign. I worked in the Sobieski campaign and Stevenson campaigns. Then Phil got interested. Then I really got active in the community of La Puente, because it did get incorporated. We had a business in East Los Angeles and then moved our business to La Puente.

VASQUEZ: What was it about La Puente at the time that attracted many Mexican-Americans to move out of the eastside?

SOTO: I think it was just the availability of the G.I. bill and the houses. A lot of them came up that way. We never dreamed of being there. The only thing that made it attractive to me was that it was between both mothers. His mother lived in L.A., my mother lived in Pomona, and it was right in the middle. So one Sunday we'd go to visit one mother, and the next Sunday we'd go to visit the other mother. One Christmas at one mother's Until our kids grew up, then we started having our own. But it was just kind of understood. You know, that doesn't happen anymore in Mexican families. It's sad. It's a sad testimony to what's happened to our culture, you know?

Anyway, we got involved in the incorporation just a little bit, because we moved right at the end of the campaign. But we still helped a little, and La Puente got incorporated. That was 1956.

Then my kids started school there. They went to parochial school, so there wasn't any parents' club, there weren't any activities going. So old nosey-nose here got involved and started a parents' club at the school in Saint

Joseph's [Parish].

There weren't any little league clubs. So I told my husband, "Phil, we've got to start a little league so these kids can start playing ball." We got a bunch of couples together and started a little league organization.

There was an issue of a dump being put near our house, and then we started a homeowners' association [Sky Ranch Village Homeowners]. All of these things happened because the town was so new. La Puente had been there for eons, except that it wasn't incorporated, so there wasn't anything organized.

VASQUEZ: Who were the powers in La Puente at the time?

SOTO: The old-timers, of course.

VASQUEZ: Who would they be?

SOTO: The Sorcables, the Rolands.

VASQUEZ: Was the big influx after the war primarily . . .

SOTO: Then a lot of the East L.A. Mexicans moved out to the San Gabriel Valley. A lot of them landed in Bassett, a lot of them in La Puente.

It was not just Hispanics either. There was a good mixture. Let me tell you something. People moved into the San Gabriel Valley because

it's an ideal place to live. It really is. It's a good mixture of everything.

I think that's one of the reasons that in the San Gabriel Valley they've elected Hispanics as well as Anglos. They don't have any reservations about voting for a Torres or a Soto or a Montoya. They'll kick them out of office or they'll elect them, it just depends on who the guy is. They don't have any qualms about it, because there's such a good mixture. It hasn't been just one raza [race], you know? So everybody was moving in. We moved next to each other, our kids played ball together, and so forth.

Anyway, Phil was instrumental in starting the parents' club, the little league club. He was in the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1944], and we started a G.I. Forum--you know, a lot of things that we just got involved in within the community. We had just moved our business to La Puente.

VASQUEZ: What kind of business was that?

SOTO: It was a TV sales and service.

VASQUEZ: What was the name of it?

SOTO: Lucky TV Sales and Service. It was a success. We were the Joneses, the ones to keep up with.

VASQUEZ: The ideal, middle-class family?

SOTO: Right, in that era. Then, in 1958, [Daniel] Dan Salcido, who was really involved in the league with kids--his kids were involved--asked Phil to run for city council. Phil, not being a politician, didn't want to, didn't think it was anything he could do. So Dan went and got the filing papers for Phil, went around and circulated them himself and got the twenty signatures for Phil to run for city council. And he did. He won because a bunch of people helped him. I got cards and ran around a lot and got him elected.

VASQUEZ: What was your role in that campaign?

SOTO: My role? I've always been very active in his campaigns. I just really worked hard to help. I think he's a really brilliant guy. People tend to think that he's not because he's very passive and quiet. But I know what's inside.

VASQUEZ: What were the issues in that race, do you remember?

SOTO: At the time? [Laughter] Traffic. What were the issues in La Puente? I really don't remember, to be honest with you. Phil might remember when you talk to him. All I remember is that I was really

active and asked people to vote for him. I got some cards for my friends to send. He was elected with 500 votes because there were so many candidates.

VASQUEZ: Yes, nineteen, if I remember correctly.

SOTO: I don't remember how many candidates, but there was a whole load of them. That was a beginning. And that year I had read The Enemy Within¹ and was really impressed with [Robert F.] Bobby Kennedy. I also read Profiles in Courage² and was impressed with [Senator John F.] Jack [Kennedy]. Let's see, we went to the Los Angeles League of Cities convention in 1958. And the next year we went to-- I don't remember if it was that year or the next year--San Francisco. And guess who the breakfast speaker was. Senator Jack Kennedy. I was already thinking that this young man was being groomed for president because of all the articles that were appearing. I talked to him and said to myself, "I'm going to campaign for that guy."

1. Robert F. Kennedy, The Enemy Within, (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).

2. John F. Kennedy, Profiles in Courage, (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

VASQUEZ: Well, he had made something of an impression in the 1956 national convention.

SOTO: Right, and he had been so great in the convention that you stood there glued to it, you could see that he was really something and was an up-and-coming politician. After the convention was when I read the material the Kennedys were putting out. At that time I said, "I'm going to get involved in the next campaign," because what little bit I did in that year had been fun.

Anyway, it was 1958 when we met Jack Kennedy at a breakfast meeting in San Francisco with the League of Cities, because he had just been elected [senator from Massachusetts]. I said, "That man's going to be our next president, and I'm going to start campaigning for him."

I came home and started a Citizens for Kennedy club. By then, though, I had already been appointed registration chairman by the Twenty-fifth Congressional District Council. I had gotten involved in Democratic politics during the time that Phil was on the city council. Right after the [1956] Adlai Stevenson campaign, I was appointed. The woman who was the registration

chairman for the congressional district moved to Alaska, so they asked me if I wanted to be it. Sure, I wanted to get really involved, so I was made registration chairman.

Then we went through to San Francisco, and I met Kennedy. I thought I had a really good platform from which to campaign for him. So I started a Citizens for Kennedy club. And we started a Democratic club. We went full-bore for two years. My number-four son [Patrick Jeffrey Soto] was born during the inauguration of Kennedy, so he's my Kennedy baby. I call him that. That was in 1960. We went ahead solidly and raised funds, whatever little we could do as a little group in the San Gabriel Valley.

That year, 1960, there was a guy by the name of George [A.] Kasem, who was a congressman, a really nice man. He was elected in 1958 and was running for reelection [in the Twenty-fifth Congressional District] in 1960. We were campaigning for him and for a guy by the name of [Ronald B.] Cameron for the [state] assembly [Fiftieth District]. Plus, of course, there was our involvement with Kennedy.

Well, Cameron kept saying that Kennedy was going to be the demise of them, because he was a "goddamn intellectual," because he was a Catholic, and because there were a lot of people against them [Catholics and intellectuals].

Cameron had been an Adlai Stevenson delegate. I don't remember what Kasem had been, whether he'd been for Stevenson or Kennedy. But, anyway, as it turned out, as you know very well history tells us, Kennedy won the nomination and so forth. We went on with the campaign in November, and Kasem lost that congressional campaign. A guy by the name of John [H.] Rousselot, Mr. John Birch himself, was elected in his place.

So guess what? There was an empty [state assembly] seat for the Democrats in the San Gabriel Valley [in 1962]. That election had been in 1960. Phil had already served on the city council two years. So as soon as that election was over and poor George [Kasem] lost. . . . God, that was sad. So that kind of put a pallor over the victory that we had with Kennedy and with Cameron. But I said to Phil, "You know, Cameron's assembly seat is going to be a good,

good place for you to run. Because Cameron's going to be the logical one to go for Congress." He said, "Nah, nah, nah." I said, "You wait."

We still kept our little Democratic club, kept up activities in the Democratic club. It didn't take long for Cameron to start talking about running for Congress and getting his troops together and so forth. I liked Ron. He was a really nice guy. I liked him. I pledged myself to get him to Congress.

Well, to make a long story short, there were nine candidates for the assembly in 1962. One of them had the newspaper endorsement, another one had labor endorsement. Phil had nothing but people.

VASQUEZ: Before we get to that, how did Phil make the decision to go ahead and run?

SOTO: Well, it would just seem like the logical thing to do. I don't know how he made the decision. Maybe it was my prompting him. I don't know. But a lot of people kept telling him that he should. He was on the city council, he was the only councilman who ran. And he was very popular, very well known. We had been really active in the party, really

active. You couldn't find another couple that was more active. We'd go to all the fund-raisers, we would help with the campaigns, we helped all the candidates. So it was just logical.

VASQUEZ: The Democrats had been doing quite nicely since 1958, hadn't they?

SOTO: Yes, yes. Except that there were so many [Democrats] running that labor endorsed their own candidate. [Daniel] Dan Monday was their candidate, a labor guy. Another guy by the name of [Edward] Ed Lackey, he was endorsed by another group. So we didn't have the party endorsement nor did we have the newspaper endorsement or anything.

VASQUEZ: When you say newspaper, what newspaper would that be?

SOTO: The San Gabriel Valley Tribune. But because we had been active, because we started little leagues and parents' clubs and had done VFWs and all that, he won overwhelmingly. Because he was popular and I was popular. We did a lot of work together. I worked my buns off to get him elected.

We were really active in Saint Martha's [Parish]. That, I think, helped him, because

nobody had a parish that was just beginning like Saint Martha's Parish. We had about ten couples that worked their buns off with me, you know, to help him get elected. They were so proud to have him. And our pastor was so proud to have an assemblyman in the parish.

VASQUEZ: Why is it you weren't able to garner the party endorsement? You'd worked hard.

SOTO: Well, in the primary, you never got the party endorsement. You just didn't get it. They just let you run, and whoever won in the primary then got the party endorsement in the general [election]. So he did get it then.

Then [Assemblyman] Harvey Johnson won in the Fifty-eighth District, which is right next door. And Ron Cameron won the nomination for congressman; he ran against George Kasem. That was a heartbreaking thing, because George was very hurt that we didn't support him, we supported Ron. That campaign turned out to be the '62 campaign. We ran a unified campaign with [Governor Edmund [G.] Pat Brown [Sr.], Soto, and Cameron. Everybody won, because, as you said, the Democrats were doing great in those days.

You asked me how active I was in this campaign. I was about as active as any wife could be.

VASQUEZ: Who was the campaign manager? Did you have a campaign manager for his assembly . . .

SOTO: Well, you always have a campaign manager in name.

VASQUEZ: Who was that?

SOTO: Actually it was Phil and I doing it. In the general election, it was an old friend, Art Seltzer. When you run for an office, if you don't do the work yourself, you're going to be hard put to get elected. If you're going to wait for your campaign manager, you're going to be waving goodbye to everybody in a few months. Actually, Phil and I were the resource people. We got the troops out. We were the ones that developed the strategy. Phil developed the strategy, and I carried it out and got the people. But it was his strategy that did it.

He [Phil] got elected [to the assembly] in 1962. He was a party man. In 1964, he almost lost because of the famous Rumford [Fair Housing] Act,¹ you know. So in 1966, when [Ronald] Reagan

¹. A.B. 1240, 1963 Leg. Sess, Cal. Stat. 1853 (1963).

ran [for governor], when he [Reagan] was so popular, the Rumford Act had already done its job in the '64 election. That's all you needed.

VASQUEZ: Phil was defeated by William Campbell, is that correct?

SOTO: Yeah. That was 1966. We had gone to the 1964 Democratic national convention in Atlantic City [New Jersey]. It was very poignant.

VASQUEZ: Who were you pledged to as a delegate?

SOTO: I was not a delegate, Phil was. [Lyndon Baines Johnson] LBJ had been president for a year because of Kennedy's death. But the people really wanted Bobby [Kennedy] then. But out of respect and because of the fact that LBJ was the incumbent, they nominated him. That's when he [Johnson] beat [Barry M.] Goldwater. If it hadn't been for that, Phil might have lost in '64, as [Assemblyman] John Moreno did in the old Fifty-ninth District. John Moreno lost due to some bad publicity that he got, because he had been drinking in Sausalito and they caught him. Some Chicano [Joe López] ran against him in Pico Rivera.

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

SOTO: After 1966, Phil became a lobbyist. He was in Sacramento in 1967.

VASQUEZ: For whom did he lobby?

SOTO: I don't remember. He can tell you. He'll tell you. I don't remember who it was.

In 1968, towards the end of '67, there were rumbles that Bobby [Kennedy] was running for president. And, of course, I was very excited about that. I thought he would make the most wonderful president. And I still think he would have. I think things would be so different now. He started talking about it, I guess, in late '67. We still had our little club, we still did our little politics, even though Phil had lost. We still were involved to a degree. [We were] just interested.

VASQUEZ: His loss didn't alienate you from the Democratic party at all?

SOTO: No. Why would it? I suppose I could have blamed it on the party. I didn't think they helped him to the degree that he needed it.

VASQUEZ: Why not?

SOTO: Well, it was just assumed that because he had a 64-percent party registration. . . . There's a big story behind that. The Baker v. Carr decision in 1965,¹ the reapportionment. There was a guy by the name of [Assemblyman] Jack [R.] Fenton in charge of redistricting. I remember so vividly the day that we went to the Dodgers' World Series game. I said, "Jack, I don't like the district you're drawing for Phil. It's got too much of Hacienda Heights in it." And he said, "Ah, it's going to be all right. It's a 64-percent district, for Christ's sake." I said, "Yeah, but those Democrats don't vote Democrat." He said, "Don't worry, I'll take care of Phil." We came home, and I said, "Phil, you better watch your back, because those guys aren't going to take care of you. You'd better watch out, because Hacienda Heights and Diamond Bar are not going to be your district. Pomona's great. People there are great. Let them give you that. But I just don't think you ought to have the attitude, 'Oh,

1. Baker v. Carr, 369 U.S. 186 (1962).

everything's all right. It's a 64-percent district. We can't lose.'"

I think the party just took it too much for granted that it being a heavily Democratic district, there was no danger that he was going to lose. When I was working the Pico Rivera area, I had this horrible feeling. He was getting a good response in Pico Rivera, but I still had the feeling that it wasn't going right. So I said, "You better get another mailer. Just get one more mailer." The party didn't come through with money for another mailer. He was supposed to have had enough with what we had. So I always felt that they didn't try hard enough. And he thinks that no matter what they did, they couldn't have won it.

VASQUEZ: Why? Did the Rumford Act hurt Democrats that badly?

SOTO: Oh, yeah. Yeah. There was a big campaign in the San Gabriel Valley against it, against him because of that.

VASQUEZ: Who headed that campaign?

SOTO: Campbell's people.

VASQUEZ: Was he tied in to real estate?

SOTO: Sure. Herbert Hawkins [Realty]. A lot of the big realtors were against it and debated him on the logic of why he was supporting it. San Gabriel Valley is very conservative. Even though they vote for Hispanics, they expect you to be as conservative as they are. [Senator Joseph B.] Joe Montoya caught on to that one fast.

Anyway, the '65 reapportionment was supposed to have been Phil's "safe seat," for him to never lose another campaign for the next ten years. Well, the irony of it is that he did lose it, because it just wasn't safe enough. And that came about because of Baker v. Carr and the reapportionment and so forth, the stuff that [Assemblyman Thomas M.] Tom Rees was against.

I'm a little philosophical about such things. I always figure that things always happen for the best. I think there's something to be said for that. Anyway, that happened in '66. Then the lobbying came. And then we got interested in Bobby Kennedy. By January or February of '68, Bobby Kennedy announced [his presidential candidacy]. We got really involved, I mean involved in his campaign. You would not believe how

involved we got. Terribly involved. And then he [Phil] decided to run again in '68 to see how it would be. He won.

VASQUEZ: In the same district?

SOTO: Right. He got the nomination again. He won the nomination. Phil held the nomination from 1962 to 1968. He had it eight years. He won the nomination again. Everything was going beautifully, because we knew that if Bobby Kennedy won, he would become president. He would have beaten [Richard M.] Nixon in a minute. But then, you know what happened, you know the rest. Kennedy died. But Phil won an overwhelming victory in the primary that year.

Then the party didn't really do anything in the general election. We didn't have the money. [We] couldn't fight the Chicago riots. And you know what happened. Nixon won and so forth.

VASQUEZ: What kind of campaign was it at the local level that William Campbell was able to mount? What kind of issues did he raise?

SOTO: The issue was fair housing. That's what the issue was.

VASQUEZ: In 1968, four years later?

SOTO: Yes. He was still doing the same thing. Campbell was already in office. The fact that it was a 64-percent district and that Kennedy had come in so strong--he won that district overwhelmingly--made it possible for us to win the primary. If Kennedy would have lived, he [Phil] would have won the general election and Campbell would have been out.

VASQUEZ: That's what I'm asking. Why is it that Campbell was able to win?

SOTO: Because of the top of the ticket being popular and the Democrats going down in Chicago . . .

VASQUEZ: Fighting among themselves?

SOTO: Yeah. And I said that that district tends to be very conservative. However, they were Kennedy-ites. The San Gabriel Valley was for Kennedy. Every time a Kennedy ran, you didn't have to worry about it, because he would win. But there was something about the Rumford Act, and by '68 people had been redistricted, remember.

So it turned into a conservative Democratic area more than before [reapportionment]. Before, we had West Covina, South El Monte, La Puente. We didn't even have Pico Rivera. We had part of Hacienda Heights, the poor section of Hacienda

Heights. And that's all. So when they redistricted, they put in Pomona, Hacienda Heights, Diamond Bar, and Pico Rivera. They took away West Covina, where he was known. So, you know, we never had Diamond Bar in the district before. We never had this side of Hacienda Heights.

VASQUEZ: So that reapportionment really did you in, didn't it?

SOTO: Yeah. Yeah, they really fixed him up with that.

VASQUEZ: Let's go back to what it was like being the wife of an assemblyman. How did his being elected to the assembly change your life-style and your family life?

SOTO: It was very busy.

VASQUEZ: You never lived in Sacramento?

SOTO: No.

VASQUEZ: He was a commuter?

SOTO: Yes. He'd come home Friday afternoon or Thursday afternoon. He never missed a weekend unless I was up there. He was a good father. My life as a wife didn't change much as an assemblyman's wife.

VASQUEZ: Because you stayed in the district?

SOTO: Because I stayed here. It was just busy on weekends because he had functions to go to. But that

didn't change my life very much, other than at campaign time. We always had functions to go to.

But other than that, trying to keep my kids in school, being a little league mother, the whole thing. Still being active in the community. I think that probably was more helpful than moving away. In retrospect, I sometimes say I maybe should have moved away.

VASQUEZ: Tell me, did you ever join a group called PALS? Were you ever invited to join the PALS?

SOTO: Oh, I was invited a lot, yes.

VASQUEZ: What did you know about it?

SOTO: All I knew about it was that the wives of the assemblymen had an organization and did things. But I never really bothered to find out what, because I didn't live there. I wasn't into a lot of tea-and-crumpet type things. I never have been a coffee klatscher. You know, lunches and that, at that time, didn't really interest me. I just wanted to do meat-and-potato things, things that were solid issues, that would do some good for the people, the community.

VASQUEZ: During the time he was in the assembly, what issues particularly got you involved in politics

as a wife of an assemblyman, do you remember?

SOTO: Oh, I was interested in everything he was doing. Some of the things I brought up to him, he would take them in. We drew up--he didn't get the credit for it--the Compensatory Education Bill.¹ Head Start, a lot of those things for disadvantaged children, Phil and I thought of. He would take them up with him, they would get put into the hopper, and it would come out as some kind of a bill sponsored by somebody else.

VASQUEZ: How did that make you feel?

SOTO: At the time? I didn't give it much thought, as long as it was there and as long as some good was being done. Things were being legislated, things that I thought were good. It bothers me more now to think that I don't get credit for things that I do than it did then. I was just a little bit naive, I think. I know that he did a lot of good things that he didn't get credit for.

Another thing that was my idea, that he [Phil] did and took back, came out as the Quimby

¹. A.B. 1331, 1965 Leg. Sess., Cal. Stat. 1248 (1965).

Act.¹ I think it's very important that every developer putting in a new subdivision now has to dedicate a little bit of land commensurate with the amount of children that are projected to be in the tract. That idea was conceived in my home.

VASQUEZ: Is this for parks and recreational areas?

SOTO: They can turn it into a park or recreational area. It's called the Quimby Act because [Assemblyman John P.] Quimby was the chairman of County and Muni [Committee on County and Municipal Government], and he [Phil] was on that committee.

The reason that I brought that up, thought about it, and Phil took it back to Sacramento was because we didn't have any recreational land in the tract into which we had moved. We had to rent or borrow what we called "goat hill." The dads raked it up and put in a backstop. That's where the kids used to practice ball. But we didn't have any place for the kids to play, so I said, "You know what you ought to do? You ought to make it a law that every developer that puts in houses should leave some land for kids to play

1. A.B. 1150, Leg. Sess., Cal. Stat. 1809 (1965).

in." And they did, they made that a law.

The Head Start Program is where children go to school before going to school and learn how to act and behave and stuff. I don't remember, there were so many things that were ideas I had brought up, and he would take back with him. Eventually, they became laws under somebody else's name.

VASQUEZ: When he would be home on weekends, did you spend a lot of time strategizing?

SOTO: Sometimes, not all the time.

VASQUEZ: Would you call him up in the middle of the week and say, "Look, here's a hot idea?"

SOTO: Oh, yeah. Sure. We talked a lot during the week.

VASQUEZ: How did the economics of your family change? Assemblymen didn't make a lot of money in those days.

SOTO: Very drastically. Drastically. When he was on the city council, it was okay because we had our business. We had a very good little business in television sales and service. But upon getting elected, he had to sell it. He didn't think I could run it because I was having all these kids. The guy that he had thought would be able to run it, his sister bought a restaurant, so he went to

work for her instead. So we didn't have anybody [to run our business]. He sold it. At that time, assemblymen were only making \$500 a month. I think they were only getting a \$17 per diem. So it was very, very slim picking. I don't even know how he did it, to tell you the truth.

VASQUEZ: Did you work outside of the home?

SOTO: No. I was having babies. I had a baby three months after he was elected [Thomas Leopold Soto], before he was installed. And I had had one about a year and a half before that [Anna Marie Soto]. And about a year before that one, I had had another one [Patrick Jeffrey Soto]. So I had three in a row. It was really hard for me to do anything.

However, even having those babies, I still used to help him with the campaigns and the business. I did a lot of the things that most wives don't bother to do. I don't know how I did it. I campaigned, I kept house, I raised children, I had the children, and I helped him in the business. Now that I think about it, how did I do all that? But I did do it.

It was fun. It was real fun. I mean, I feel

as if I really accomplished a lot. And my mother used to say, [Laughter] "Why don't you run? Why don't you? That poor guy! You're just making him run! You're always campaigning. Why don't you run it? You're the one that should run."

VASQUEZ: Did you ever seriously think of it?

SOTO: I'd say, "Ma, people are never going to elect me. This is not the time for women. Women are not going to be elected." That was very realistic.

VASQUEZ: And was that the real, basic reason why you wouldn't run?

SOTO: Yes. I would have loved to have run then. I would still love it, to be an assemblyperson, but I'm too old now. That'll never happen.

VASQUEZ: Well, look at [President] Ronald Reagan. You still may run.

What did you share with him about the experience of getting into the swing of things up there? Learning the procedures, not only the formal procedures of how a bill becomes a law, but about all the ins and outs of the politics that go on in Sacramento in surviving.

Do you remember some of the things that might have either surprised you, gotten you off balance,

or made you have to get into a huddle in order to survive and to get things done? You mentioned, for example--and this happens to everybody, I suppose--that there were ideas for legislative programs that he would take up there but would end up bringing somebody else the credit. What kind of things would you discuss with him?

SOTO: Well, we always discussed--and still discuss--legislation. I don't remember, frankly. I wish I did. I wish I could remember. I've always been intensely interested in legislation, just intensely.

VASQUEZ: How about personalities? Jesse [M.] Unruh was the Speaker of the Assembly at the time that Phil got up there and was doing some pretty exciting things. The whole legislature was going through a very dynamic process, but primarily the assembly. The assembly was becoming more independent and was initiating more legislation. Unruh was trying to professionalize the legislature. What are your recollections in those days, for example, of Jesse Unruh as speaker?

SOTO: Well, I don't really think that I was involved enough. He [Phil] probably could tell you more

about that. But I know there was a lot of strategizing. There was an organization called the California Democratic Council that Jesse was always battling. I'd imagine there was a lot of strategy talked about in those days.

VASQUEZ: Did you know about the CDC down here in southern California?

SOTO: Oh, yes. Sure.

VASQUEZ: Were you a member? Or were you ever close to people who were?

SOTO: Oh, no. I was close to people who were [members].

VASQUEZ: What was your perception of the CDC?

SOTO: There were CDCers and non-CDCers, and we were the non-CDCers.

VASQUEZ: What was your perception of the CDCers?

SOTO: Extremely liberal people who would rather see a Republican elected than compromise their extreme, left-wing liberal philosophy.

I never was really that involved with CDC. I only knew that all the Democrats I was involved with didn't like it. What I knew about it was that I always felt that they would rather see a Republican elected than compromise on their philosophy.

I'm a person who would rather compromise a little and get a Democrat elected than to sacrifice the Democrat and see a Republican elected just because of my feelings for the Democratic platform or whatever. That's really where the battles would come, on the platform. They would be to the extreme left. There were always those very pragmatic, moderate people who felt you had to be careful on your philosophy when you were drawing up a platform. Otherwise, you couldn't sell it to the electorate.

I think that's where the battle lines were drawn, on philosophies. So there were the Unruh Democrats and there were the CDC Democrats. I proudly say I was with the Unruh Democrats. Not so much that he cared a lot about me or whatever, but he was very socially-minded and knew when to initiate the legislation that would do the most good for the most people. I think that's where the difference was.

He used to say something that I was always very aware of and very impressed with: "You do what you have to do to get elected. You first get elected, then you can do what you know you

need to do." You know, to change legislation, change laws, and so forth. But if you don't get elected, you're not going to do anybody any good.

VASQUEZ: Were you aware of the group that was around Jesse Unruh as a part of his team when he was the speaker?

SOTO: Yes, somewhat.

VASQUEZ: Who were some of those people that you remember?

SOTO: [Assemblyman Jerome R.] Jerry Waldie, [Assemblyman Robert W.] Bob Crown. . . . I guess I'm having a hard time remembering them.

VASQUEZ: Do you remember [Assemblyman Thomas M.] Tom Rees?

SOTO: Tom Rees, Tom Bane, Carlos Bee. I never got very close to them. He [Phil] did. I just knew them because he used to talk about them. And I was away, I was 500 miles away all the time, so what little bit I did know them. . . . George Deukmejian was in the class that Phil went up with. He wasn't one of Unruh's boys, but Jesse was speaker when George was in the assembly. [William F.] Bill Stanton. God, Bill Stanton was a CDCer. [Philip A.] Phil Burton was another CDCer. [William T.] Bill Bagley. I don't remember them all.

VASQUEZ: You do a lot better than some of the people that were up in Sacramento at the time. [Laughter] What was your impression of the [Governor Edmund G.] Brown [Sr.] administration in general, and of the governor in particular, at the time?

SOTO: Oh, the governor? I thought he was a nice old man. At the time, I thought he was old. Now I'm as old as he was.

VASQUEZ: But he didn't excite you?

SOTO: No. No. It's really funny. I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't easily get impressed with people. Some people will go crazy when they meet the governor or see the president of the United States. They go ape, but it doesn't ever impress me that much. I think everybody's basically the same. I saw the pope, and he was a pope. I was right close to him. I figure it's just another person. He may be a little holier than I am, but he's not that much different. I was never impressed, still am not, with myself or anybody else that much. I just feel you're here today and gone tomorrow, so what's the big deal? I don't know if I'm giving you the right answer because . . .

VASQUEZ: The answer you want to give me is the one that counts.

SOTO: It might not be something to record in history, because that's how I feel.

VASQUEZ: I think it is. Do you remember having a sense of [Governor] Brown's program, "responsible liberalism" as the administration called it? Were you aware that there was a body of thought which involved some legislation, a certain social program that was at play during the Brown administration?

SOTO: I didn't particularly care who was moving through the legislation that I was interested in, be it social, educational, or whatever the legislation was, if I thought it was good. I never really paid particular attention to the battles that were going on between Jesse and Pat Brown.

I thought Pat Brown was a nice old man. He was very friendly, very nice to my kids who ran around the Capitol like it was their house, as did [Assemblyman] Joe [A.] Gonsalves's kids. Anybody who had kids there made themselves at home. Pat Brown was always really nice to them. But I never really got concerned about the legislation, whether it was extremely liberal,

not liberal, or whatever. What concerned me the most, I think, were the battles that were taking place that were divisive.

VASQUEZ: For example?

SOTO: Oh, I can't think of any legislation right now.

VASQUEZ: What was your perception of the conflict between Unruh and Brown?

SOTO: I think it was just between the extreme liberal and the middle-of-the-road or moderate positions.

VASQUEZ: You think Brown was too liberal at the time?

SOTO: I think that he tended to lean toward the CDC more than the middle of the road. I think he kind of secretly wished that he could have been on the side of Jesse Unruh. But, see, he was stuck with [Thomas B.] Tom Carvey [Jr.]. Tom Carvey was the leader of the CDC at the time. But he [Brown] was stuck because they [the CDC] had supported him. They thought that they had won the campaign for him.

They never thought that that might have been the [electoral] pendulum swinging the other way, that it was now time to get a Democrat elected [as governor] and that he [Brown] just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

History will put him down, I think, as a good governor. But a lot of people forget who the legislators were during his time. And that's where good government comes in, from the legislation that is initiated and passed during the years of whoever is governor, whether it is vetoed or not vetoed.

VASQUEZ: One of Governor Brown's closest advisers was Hale Champion. Did you ever know him?

SOTO: I only knew of him through Phil.

VASQUEZ: Did you have an occasion to form an opinion about their relationship?

SOTO: No. I just knew he was very close to the governor.

VASQUEZ: What was the most fulfilling thing about being the wife of an assemblyman in your district in the sixties?

SOTO: I think the most significant thing to me was that Phil was one of the first Hispanic legislators. To me, that was very significant. Although he never ran on that banner, as the standard-bearer of anything, it was very coolly and calmly accepted. But we knew that we had broken a barrier--the two of us knew it--that had been

there for years. I mean, in the whole century of this state, a state that had been founded by and been [part of] Mexico, they had never had a Mexican in the legislature. I think that is still significant, and I would hope that somebody would put that in the history. To me, it's really very important that people know that.

I resent the fact that people forget that Phil was here. I resent it very, very much. Because he is a very intelligent man. The new politicians, the new "Chicanos," if you will, out of fear, megalomania, whatever, have forgotten that this is a guy who penetrated that barrier and broke it open for them.

VASQUEZ: You don't think they've acknowledged that adequately?

SOTO: I don't think so. I don't think they ever have. It really bothers me. I get mad at him for being so passive about it, but that's the way he is. I just think that there ought to be more people than there have been who acknowledge that.

VASQUEZ: What was the most frustrating or least fulfilling thing about being the wife of an assemblyman? What is the thing that you disliked the most?

SOTO: I can't imagine what.

VASQUEZ: The economics, perhaps? [Laughter]

SOTO: No, it didn't bother me being poor.

VASQUEZ: You had a lot of practice at it. [Laughter]

SOTO: I sure did. I never really thought about that, about what was least fulfilling. I just thought it was a lot of fun.

VASQUEZ: What kinds of things did you learn as a result of it?

SOTO: What did I learn about politics? You really can't get that involved with the people, too close to the grassroots, because I think that might be a mistake. I think you help them a lot--like what I was doing here tonight with my city council constituents--and then you pull back.

VASQUEZ: Why?

SOTO: They love you today and hate you tomorrow. You may do something today that they'll like you for a lot. And then something has to be done in legislation that you think is really necessary which they may not like it, and then they'll hate you for it. So I think you should just keep a steady distance where you're close enough to help but you're not so close that it would really

bother you if they got mad at you. It bothers me to know that I'm not doing one hundred percent of what people like all the time. If I wasn't a realistic person, it would probably bother me more than it does.

VASQUEZ: Let's put this in context, because you're now a councilwoman in the city of Pomona, is that correct?

SOTO: Yes.

VASQUEZ: Is that the first political office you've ever held?

SOTO: Not if you count the county committee, because I was elected to the Los Angeles County Democratic Central Committee.

VASQUEZ: What year was that?

SOTO: In 1967 or 1968. I don't remember which year it was. I know that I used to run for the Democratic Central Committee, and I used to get even more votes than the congressmen.

VASQUEZ: Why do you think that was?

SOTO: I don't know. I'd get more votes than anybody.

VASQUEZ: Were you a hard worker, were you popular, were you louder than everybody else?

SOTO: Maybe, or just because of the name, the Soto name.

But I was elected two or three times. I don't remember whether I just stopped running, retired, or resigned from there. It's been so long. It's been twenty-five years. But that was a political office. And that arm of the party is a legal one. They help draw up the platform, you attend the state committee conventions, and then you help charter more clubs. That's what your job is. But you don't really have that much activity.

VASQUEZ: It's episodic, isn't it?

SOTO: Yes.

VASQUEZ: Did you hold any other office between then and being a city councilwoman?

SOTO: No.

VASQUEZ: When were you elected to the city council of the city of Pomona?

SOTO: Just last year, in April of 1987.

VASQUEZ: Tell me why you decided to run.

SOTO: Just a challenge. I have always loved legislation. I love government. Maybe it is my ego. I never thought of it that way. I just think that there are some things that I can help with. And there are some things that I have gotten done, although not visible.

VASQUEZ: How many women are there on that city council?

SOTO: Two. The mayor [Donna Smith] is a woman.

VASQUEZ: What's the size of it?

SOTO: Five.

VASQUEZ: Have you enjoyed your year on that council?

SOTO: Frustrating as it is, yes, I love it.

VASQUEZ: What's most frustrating about it?

SOTO: The slow pace of getting things done. I'm a pusher and a doer. I like to go, go, go, do things right now. I get very impatient if I can't get something done right away. I just feel like so much could be done if you just didn't have to go through all the bureaucracy. That's probably, I think, the most frustrating part of it.

VASQUEZ: Who is your [particular] constituency?

SOTO: The entire city of Pomona, 117,000 counted.
There may be more.

VASQUEZ: What are now the main issues in the city since you've been on the council?

SOTO: Since I've been on the council? We're concentrating a lot on the image of the city.

VASQUEZ: Why do you think that's necessary?

SOTO: Because Pomona has a bad image--or has developed a bad image in the last ten years. I think it's

been the last ten or twelve years.

VASQUEZ: What is that image, that negative image?

SOTO: Decadence, crime, a bad city to go to. We're trying to erase that image, improve the quality of life. To sound corny, improve the quality of life in Pomona and make people want to live here, not want to move out. We have some really nice homes in Pomona that have been here for years and years. Pomona is one hundred years old. It's one of the oldest historical towns in southern California. There's a lot of history here that could be taken advantage of. I'd like to see some of it garnered and put into a tourist attraction or something. I don't think that'll ever happen. I'm the only one that seems to be thinking that. It has a strong Spanish heritage that I think is very significant and should be brought out.

VASQUEZ: Do you think there's an appreciation for that?

SOTO: I think there are in some circles. But since I got on the council, I have started an organization called Founders' Day. We had a fiesta last year. Because of the involvement of the Hispanics, I think the Anglos got a little turned

off, because it turned out to be an Hispanic thing. I didn't want it that way, but that's the way it turned out. My contention was and still is that this town was founded by Hispanics. I was determined that Hispanics were going to get recognition for founding the city, because nobody has ever really brought that out.

VASQUEZ: But your idea was not to exclude other groups?

SOTO: Oh, no, no, no. No, it wasn't my idea to exclude anyone. But there are some people who are very unhappy with how that situation turned out. If you call it a fiesta, it makes it too "Mexicany." But I have more Anglos on the committee than anything else, and they're doing the work with my guidance. Last year was the first one, and we had over 5,000 people attend. It wasn't all just Hispanics. There was a good mixture. It was beautiful.

I think that one of the things that I would like to do before I leave office is to make people very aware that this town was founded by Hispanics, that there is a population here that has to be accounted for and contended with. For too long now, too long, the Hispanics in Pomona

have been looked down upon. And they've allowed it. They've allowed it.

In the old days, I never would have dreamed of living where I live now, on this side of town. I used to clean houses on this side of town for a dollar a day. That may not seem significant to you, because if you're like Phil and you were born in East L.A. . . . He never even thought that there was any discrimination. I used to tell him, "We have to have some laws on discrimination." He'd say, "Why?" I would say, "Because, you should see how it is where I came from in Pomona." In East L.A. there's no discrimination. Everybody's the same.

Things have changed, but not to the degree that I would like to see them changed, where people don't look down on you. I was elected, I think, not so much because I was that standard-bearer but because I wanted to be the representative for everybody, to prove to people that if you have brown skin, you can still do that. You don't have to be a Mexican legislator for just Mexicans; you can be an Hispanic legislator for everybody.

[Session 2, August 25, 1988]

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

VASQUEZ: Mrs. Soto, the last time that we spoke, we went over some of your experience in politics and discussed the fact that you are now a city councilwoman for the city of Pomona. You also work for the Southern California Rapid Transit District [RTD]. In what capacity do you work there?

SOTO: I'm a local government and community affairs representative. My responsibilities are to work as a liaison between cities and the district. I keep the district informed on what the cities' concerns are and I keep the cities informed on what the district's concerns are, what's going on between them so that we can coordinate efforts and try to provide the best service possible.

VASQUEZ: Those are known as no-win, high-pressure jobs.

SOTO: Yes, very.

VASQUEZ: Give me an example of the kinds of things that you have to contend with.

SOTO: Well, for instance, there's a very controversial situation going on right now. My area is the San Gabriel Valley, and it's common knowledge right

now that [Los Angeles County] Supervisor [Peter F.] Schabarum has been trying to implement a transportation zone made up of private contractors rather than the RTD. His idea is to bring in private contractors and contract with them using public money rather than the way we're doing it. To have a private, nonprofit corporation run with state, federal, and local money will prove more "cost-effective," in his words. Right now that's very controversial, because he is attempting--I don't know how true this is--to destroy the RTD, but he is attempting to do his best, I think, to minimize the importance of the RTD in the San Gabriel Valley.

VASQUEZ: What is your role in that conflict or controversy?

SOTO: Well, actually, I try to keep as low-key as possible. It's not to my advantage to do anything against the supervisor, because it wouldn't do me any good if the cities are in favor of it.

I try not to be out in front opposing it, although if I'm asked for my opinion, I give the side of the district. I try to support the district in whatever they feel is important. We

provide a good service. We probably have the best operators, even though they're highly paid. Incidentally, that's one of Schabarum's bones of contention. He feels the reason the cost of public transportation is so high is because of the union. One trend of thought or belief among those who are in decision-making positions is that Supervisor Schabarum is out to break the union. His contention is that he's out to save the public some money. I tend to keep a very low-key attitude towards it, because I don't have the power to stop it.

So I just do my job in representing the district and their position as well as I can. If the San Gabriel Valley wants to privatize the transportation services, then I will do everything that I can as an RTD employee to help bring about a cohesive situation, working together with RTD providing the regional transportation and private contractors providing the local transportation.

It's to my advantage to try to work with both entities, the supervisor and the cities. And it's to the RTD's advantage to not have any of those entities angry with it. You can't

afford to have the cities against you and the district can't afford to have the supervisor against it. So my position has been to just do my job as a representative of the RTD and not oppose the privatizing.

VASQUEZ: How many hours a week do you give to this position?

SOTO: Between forty and fifty-five hours.

VASQUEZ: How many hours do you give to the city council work?

SOTO: I do about two to three hours a night, sometimes four hours a night. It depends on what time I get home from work. And I work on weekends. I'll work all day Saturday on my city council duties.

VASQUEZ: Do you have any family responsibilities?

SOTO: Oh, sure.

VASQUEZ: What would they be?

SOTO: Well, my husband. I still consider that a responsibility. I owe him something. I owe this house, [Laughter] even if it doesn't look as if I try to do anything with it. I do try. And whatever little bit gets done, I do. I just feel very, very responsible as a mother and a grandmother to

be here when my children are here. I try to be here on Sundays. I don't do anything public on Sunday, unless it's my job, I am asked to go to work, and I get paid for it.

Other than that, I really don't think there's anything to be gained by being away from your family seven days a week. I'm away from them because I work. I'm away from them at night trying to comply with some of the responsibilities I have as a city councilperson. So I try to give as much of Saturday night and all day Sunday to my family, to my children or grandchildren, whatever it takes: cleaning house, accompanying my husband where he wants to go, doing what we both want to do, just being together or doing nothing, if you will.

VASQUEZ: Do you have any aspirations beyond being a city councilwoman at the moment?

SOTO: Well, it wouldn't be very honest of me to say that I don't.

VASQUEZ: What might those be? At one point in the interview you told me that you wouldn't mind having been an assemblywoman.

SOTO: I wouldn't mind having been an assemblyperson.

VASQUEZ: Do you still harbor those aspirations?

SOTO: Well, I think I would if I were about ten years younger. But when you're sixty-two, it's a little hard to think that you can wait until the next redistricting. Because this is a Republican district. If I stay here, there's no way that I can run, successfully, because it's a Republican district. In 1990 the census will be taken, and it will be '92 before they redistrict. Who am I to think that they would draw a Democratic district with this area in it? So it's very unrealistic.

VASQUEZ: What is realistic?

SOTO: Realistic would be if I had the contacts and the connections that it takes. I guess I'd have to be a little bit younger. Maybe not that much younger, because I still have a lot of energy. But I think more than anything, even at sixty-five you can still run for office. There's nothing to keep you from it if you're healthy and well. Praise God, I am. But I think you have to have a lot more that goes with it. You have to have the wherewithal to do it, because I know what to do to win.

VASQUEZ: What office do you think you would pursue?

SOTO: I would like to think that I could still run for assembly and win. But if it doesn't happen in 1992, it's gone. [Laughter]

VASQUEZ: What is it about the assembly that's attractive to you, that makes you think it's a body where you could accomplish something?

SOTO: Oh, it's not just the assembly. If they made this a Democratic congressional district, I have thought . . .

VASQUEZ: You'd try for that?

SOTO: I would, if I thought I could get the money. It's ludicrous to think that you can win without money.

VASQUEZ: Why is that?

SOTO: Because I just think you need the money to get elected. You need money for campaigning and doing the things that it takes to get elected.

VASQUEZ: You don't think good ideas, honesty, and a good sense of government's enough?

SOTO: I don't think it's enough. I think you need that, but I don't think it's enough.

VASQUEZ: Why isn't it enough anymore?

SOTO: Well, just look around you. The last campaign in

this assembly district where there was an incumbent--and the incumbent was beaten--cost \$250,000. Now, that's obscene. So if it costs that much to run for the assembly, it must cost at least \$450,000 to \$500,000 to run for Congress.

VASQUEZ: And you think that would be your biggest hurdle?

SOTO: Oh, sure. It's anybody's, especially if there's an incumbent. How could you overcome that? The incumbent in this congressional district [David Dreier, Thirty-third Congressional District] is very popular. It would have to be an entirely new district with a strong Democratic registration. Then I could win. I could beat anybody, because I know I could probably get the money. But if it was a contest with an incumbent, it would be kind of ludicrous.

VASQUEZ: It would be too rough, you think, at this point?

SOTO: I think so. I may be wrong, but I think so.

VASQUEZ: Do you think that the contacts and the political network that you've built over the years supporting your husband as an assemblyman could be brought to bear on such a race?

SOTO: I think that, plus the contacts that I've picked

up in the last twenty to thirty years myself as his helper, the jobs that I've had, and getting myself elected with his help. People still remember him, and it has helped me a lot to be his wife. It has also helped me a lot to be the way I am.

VASQUEZ: Which is?

SOTO: I have no reservations about approaching people for support. I'm not in the least bit reticent about asking for a donation, if I need to. I think you have to be that way, you have to be aggressive if you want to win. You have to know where the bodies are, where the forces are to go and get that. I'm not claiming to know a lot of people, hundreds of rich people, but I think that I have some good acquaintances to make a darned good start. Because once you start, it kind of snowballs.

VASQUEZ: Give me an example of how that works.

SOTO: Well, you talk about how you're going to run, you approach somebody that you know has a lot of acquaintances, you know that person supports and likes you. Because of his or her contacts, they have a reception or call them [their contacts]

and say, "Hey, there's a friend of mine who's running. I think it would be good if you would help us out." And because of their influence with their friends, they can get money for you.

Then you have the people you know who like and support you. You're not going to go to anybody you think doesn't like you or wouldn't support you. You ask them for help. They, in turn, ask their friends for help. If they have any respect for their friends' opinion, they will help. I have several people who did that for me, a lot of good friends.

VASQUEZ: When you ran for the city council?

SOTO: Yes. So I think I could do that for the assembly or the Congress or whatever office I would run for.

VASQUEZ: Do you think being a woman is a barrier to any of this?

SOTO: Not to me.

VASQUEZ: Why not?

SOTO: I take that back. In this city [Pomona], what may be a barrier in the future will probably be that I'm a minority, not so much that I'm a woman.

I don't think that [being a minority] would be a barrier for the assembly or the Congress. I have never felt that was a detriment to me. I think I said that before.

I have never felt it to be a hindrance, and I've always approached it that way, just taking it for granted that nobody else is going to think that way. But I know better. I just take it for granted and pretend. I just assume that everybody's going to accept me for what's in my head and my heart, not for what I look like. I think that having that attitude has helped me a lot.

VASQUEZ: One of the dangers of interviewing an assemblyman's wife in a project which focuses on those who held office is to treat a woman who has been in that position as sort of an appendage of the man. My research and my informants indicate that that was far from the case between you and Phil Soto. Tell me a little more about the role you played in encouraging your husband to run for office.

SOTO: Well, I encouraged him a great deal. At the time, it never occurred to me to run.

VASQUEZ: Why not?

SOTO: I don't know. I really don't know why.

VASQUEZ: Not even deep down inside?

SOTO: No. Not at the time. I said before that I have a great sense of responsibility to my family, to my children. I had small children at the time. If I had thought about running, I feel I probably would have been able to handle everything, because I always have, praise God. But it didn't occur to me then. It occurred to me that he was intelligent enough and should be the one. And I did everything I could. I knew the people, I was the volunteer in the community, I had the contacts. They weren't money contacts; they were just people.

VASQUEZ: Why aren't people enough anymore? They used to be, it seems.

SOTO: Oh, they used to be.

VASQUEZ: What changed?

SOTO: Oh, I think times change, no matter how you may try to keep them from changing. I think they changed when people began being paid to do precinct work. That's when it started to change, in the late sixties, probably the middle sixties, with the big campaigns. People started to get

paid for registering voters. Then they were paid by the hour to do precinct work, in some cases, not always. But California always seemed to be the key state, and a lot of Kennedy money, for example, flowed in here. In a couple of those campaigns there was money for paid precinct workers. I think that's when it started, and that's when it started to get a little bit expensive.

What else would have caused it? I think it's just the times. You know, 1964 was the beginning of the "hit pieces." People had to have money to defend themselves if need be.

VASQUEZ: You had moved from East Los Angeles, you had a nice, new home in La Puente, you had a thriving business. You were doing quite nicely. What would make you want to get involved in politics?

SOTO: I have asked myself that a thousand times. I don't know. I ask myself that at least once a day. What would have happened if we had stayed in business? I think we probably would have succeeded, because Phil and I work as a team in the things that we do. But I really wouldn't like the thought of having missed the experience

we had of Phil being in the assembly.

VASQUEZ: As you think back, what was it that inspired and motivated you then?

SOTO: Well, as I told you before, I've always loved government, always loved government. I think it's so fascinating. And history, too. I have always believed, naive as it may be, that one person can make a difference. And I still think that. Whatever you do in life, I think you have to make an effort to leave something behind. I told you that.

I feel that if you don't agree with what's happening in government, then you try to do something about changing whatever it is that you don't agree with. If you sit back and don't do anything, then you don't have a right to complain. You just don't have a complaint coming, that's all.

I don't want this to sound Pollyannish, but I think things maybe would have been a lot easier for us if we could have been satisfied with a nine-to-five job. But Phil isn't that kind of a person either. So we were well-mated when it came to that.

I suppose it came a lot from my family. My dad never worked for anybody; he always worked for himself. I never knew what it was like to live in a family with a nine-to-five or eight-to-five routine. I've had those kinds of jobs, and I tired of them almost immediately.

VASQUEZ: I remember at one point you told me that one of the lessons that you learned was not to get too close to the people. What do you feel were the biggest mistakes that the both of you made in politics?

SOTO: When I said "too close," I meant that there are people who want to hang around you all the time. And being the people-loving person I am, I didn't mind that. However, it does have its downside. The minute you're not available to those people who like to constantly hang around you, they become your adversaries, the ones who malign you and talk badly about you.

If they get to know you--we all have bad habits and things, the way we live--people expect you to be above everyone else, not like common, ordinary people. Like right now, the way this house looks. If you were another type of person,

you would be sitting there thinking, "Well, for a councilwoman, she sure has horrible housekeeping habits. Just look at this messy table." And if people are coming over to visit you all the time and you're in curlers, you're washing diapers, your dishes are in the sink, all of a sudden you lose that glamour to all of these people.

If you do something they don't agree with, pretty soon that becomes an item for gossip. If you fight with your husband, they know it. So, with things like that, I think you should have a more private life. I think if we made a mistake, it was that our house was always open. People were in and out all the time. I think that that might have been the result of getting too close, too "grassrootsy," too down-to-earth. Rather than appreciate it, I think people have a different view of elected people.

VASQUEZ: Do you think they expect elected officials to be above everybody else?

SOTO: They expect you to be above everybody else, and I think that's wrong. I think they should appreciate you if you stay at the same level you were when you got elected. Nothing really has

changed, except that you now have another kind of a job.

VASQUEZ: Some people argue that public officials have a higher standard that they must adhere to. Presently, we see candidates running for president and senator who are being scrutinized a lot more closely than you and I would be.

SOTO: Well, sure. I'm not talking about immoral behavior. Of course, we expect our elected officials to be above that type of behavior, but I don't think anybody's that perfect.

VASQUEZ: So you think a certain social distance is proper for elected officials so that they can lead their own private lives in private?

SOTO: Well, I think they should have a private life. I think that if they do have anything that they do which is questionable, they should be more discrete about it than people have recently been. Really, I think if they're in public life, they shouldn't take a chance, because somebody somewhere is going to find it out.

VASQUEZ: Going back to the time 1966 when your husband ran for reelection to the assembly [1966], you seemed to feel that the redistricting of the area he

represented in 1965 as a result of Baker v. Carr had a lot to do with his eventual loss at the polls. Can you expand on that?

SOTO: I think it did, because they gave him an area that was highly Democratic but very conservative, that had no qualms about voting Republican: Hacienda Heights, Diamond Bar, and Rowland Heights. At the same time they gave him Pico Rivera and Pomona, two very highly Democratic areas, and La Puente and South El Monte. He won in all those areas. Those who voted, voted for him. But it wasn't enough to overcome the strongly conservative Democrats who voted for his opponent, because they were also voting for Reagan [for governor].

If it would have been in the same district where he had been before--this is just my opinion--or at least not giving him Diamond Bar and Rowland Heights, he could have won. He had never had those areas before. He had had a little bit of Hacienda Heights, but he'd never had Diamond Bar and Rowland Heights. That area could have been left out, it could have been redistricted without including a highly conservative, Anglo-Saxon,

WASPy area.

They gave him a highly Democratic area with a large minority population. In Pomona, black and brown; in Pico Rivera, highly Hispanic and Democratic; La Puente and South El Monte. But it wasn't enough in contrast to the amount of people that voted Republican even though they were Democrats, people who lived in Rowland Heights and Hacienda Heights. Taking Reagan's popularity into consideration, I think that had a lot to do with it.

VASQUEZ: Did you ever talk to members of the committee that did the redistricting or the reapportionment?

SOTO: Only while they were in the process. I asked [Assemblyman] Jack [R.] Fenton to please not include Hacienda Heights and Rowland Heights. I told him that was going to hurt Phil.

VASQUEZ: What was his response?

SOTO: "Don't worry. We'll take care of him."

VASQUEZ: Was your feeling that they had poor knowledge of the area, or were they being sloppy or what?

SOTO: Yes, poor knowledge. It was bad advice. People who draw the districts can't possibly know what it's like out here. They don't live here,

they're sitting up there in some air-conditioned office looking at a map and thinking, "Ah ha! Here are some Democrats. We're going to do this."

VASQUEZ: What percentage of Democratic registration did they feel was safe?

SOTO: It was a 64-percent district. For all intents and purposes, he never should have lost.

VASQUEZ: On paper it looks like a pretty safe district.

SOTO: On paper it's a safe district.

VASQUEZ: Some people have criticized then Assemblyman Augustus [F.] Hawkins and Congressman [James E.] Jimmy Roosevelt, who always wanted a 70- or 75-percent Democratic district. Do you think they were out of line?

SOTO: No.

VASQUEZ: Did you know that at the time? Or is it something you came to learn as a result of your experience?

SOTO: Oh, I knew it at the time. Common sense told me, because of knowing the area, that if you're going to give them those areas, then give him a higher percentage of Democrats. Give him 70 percent, but don't give him 64 percent with Hacienda

Heights in it, because he's going to lose. I went into that campaign saying that to Phil.

VASQUEZ: Knowing that, did you do anything differently in that campaign than you might have otherwise?

SOTO: We did a lot of things. I did.

VASQUEZ: Give an example.

SOTO: First of all, I was sick. I had an operation in August and wasn't able to do anything until about the middle of October, so I was way behind. I wasn't able to organize the people the way I usually did.

VASQUEZ: What would you usually do in his campaigns?

SOTO: I would be the organizer, I would be the phone-caller, I would bring the people out.

VASQUEZ: Were you sort of an adjunct to the campaign manager? Or were you the campaign manager?

SOTO: No, I never was the campaign manager, but I did all the work.

VASQUEZ: Why not?

SOTO: You can't put your wife's name down as campaign manager. It just isn't done, you know. Although everybody knew that I did all the work. In 1966 we had kind of a funny year. Phil was an incumbent, Reagan was riding high on the crest of

a popularity wave, and Pat Brown was about as popular as a flea on your arm when you're getting bitten. So there wasn't any chance, and you knew it. I have this sixth sense for politics.

VASQUEZ: Tell me, this sixth sense, where does this sixth sense come from?

SOTO: I can just smell it.

VASQUEZ: Are you correct much of the time?

SOTO: A lot of the time. Not 100 percent, but a lot of the time.

VASQUEZ: How much did the reaction to the Rumford Fair Housing Act as expressed in the Proposition 13 campaign have to do with Mr. Soto's loss?

SOTO: I think it had a lot to do with it. In 1964, he barely squeaked through. He only won by about 1,600 votes. That's why when the 1965 redistricting came around and they gave him that 64-percent district thinking it would save him, it had a lot to do with his losing. Again, that area, the West Covina area. . . . There was a very strong campaign waged against him in 1964.

VASQUEZ: By?

SOTO: By the same guy who beat him, Bill Campbell.

VASQUEZ: Did the real estate lobby play much of a role?

SOTO: Absolutely.

VASQUEZ: In what way?

SOTO: Against him!

VASQUEZ: But in what way? Doing what?

SOTO: Well, editorials, ads. I don't know who paid for the "hit piece" that went out. There was one very bad one. At that time, they weren't known as hit pieces.

VASQUEZ: What's a hit piece?

SOTO: I just picked up that term from other politicians. A hit piece is something put in the mail that says something bad about the office-holder or candidate.

VASQUEZ: What did this particular hit piece say?

SOTO: It was in reference to the Rumford Act. "If you don't sell to a black, you're going to wind up behind bars." It had a picture of a white couple behind bars with a black couple outside of the jail laughing at them. That was circulated in the district.

All of that had an impact, like the editorials against the Fair Housing Act calling it the "Rumford-Soto Act." Although all the Democrats had coauthored it, they acted as if he

was the only one.

VASQUEZ: In this district?

SOTO: Yes, the only one that had coauthored it.

Incidentally, Rumford also lost, as did most of the people who signed that bill.

VASQUEZ: What do you think it was about the Rumford Act that made people react, or that others were able to exploit in order to make people react? What was the argument that made people go the direction that they did?

SOTO: It was called the Fair Housing Act. It made it illegal to discriminate against anybody because of race, color, or creed, in selling or renting them a house. That's all it did.

But it was distorted to the point where it caused a lot of paranoia with people who owned houses they wanted to sell. People would say, "I don't want to sell my house to a black, and nobody's going to make me do it." The average, redneck WASP who all these years had felt very, very secure and complacent in their own little bailiwick, their all-white neighborhoods, now, all of a sudden, here was a law that was going to require them to sell to or rent to people of

color, be they brown, or black, or yellow, or whatever. That was not something they appreciated or were looking forward to. To this day, I think that there's more of those people than we like to think there are.

VASQUEZ: People in the Brown administration that I and others have interviewed were profoundly surprised by the reaction to the Rumford Housing Act. Were you surprised?

SOTO: No. What I'm telling you is that the limousine liberals who live in Beverly Hills and send their kids to parochial or private schools author or help to author liberal legislation, yet they wouldn't live next door to a black if they got paid to or under any circumstances. They espouse liberal legislation because they think that's the right thing to do, even though if push came to shove they wouldn't like it for their own neighborhood.

VASQUEZ: Could you give me an example of such a limousine liberal?

SOTO: No, I wouldn't care to do that.

VASQUEZ: How about another issue where "limousine liberals" may have carried the day and yet not

had to pay the piper?

SOTO: Well, I think it's everywhere.

VASQUEZ: Do you think affirmative action is an example?

SOTO: Affirmative action, absolutely. Just think of any type of legislation where they've had to literally legislate morality. They say, "Well, you can't legislate morality." I say, "The hell you can't." If it wasn't for legislation, we would not have civil rights, we would not have fair housing. There are so many things we would not have if it had not been for legislation.

I don't agree with a lot of the liberal legislation in favor of criminals, because I think that's what has now led to the decadence of our society. I do think some so-called "liberal legislation" was right. I think it should have slowed down a little bit with the advent of fair housing, affirmative action, other kinds of civil rights. We probably should have slowed down a little bit when it came to the judicial branch, when imposing sentences and those kinds of situations with criminals. But I think many of the attorneys who were espousing for there not to be such "cruel punishment" on some criminals went

overboard. Now it's really hard to turn it the other way. I think the Miranda decision thing was right.¹ But then Miranda led to other reforms that have caused people who have a tendency towards becoming criminals to take advantage of it, to use it to their advantage. I think that's wrong.

VASQUEZ: So you think it went too far?

SOTO: I think they went too far on that.

VASQUEZ: Can you think of another area where that might have been the case? How about education?

SOTO: Too far in education? I don't think we've done enough, not even for the Anglo kids, let alone for minorities.

In the Brown administration, you had a lot of people who were philosophically liberal but who had never been down to or lived in the ghetto, never been poor, never known what it was like to have to go to bed hungry. I appreciate the fact that they're at least attempting to provide through legislation the means to help the people who are in those circumstances.

1. Miranda v. Arizona, 384 U.S. 436 (1966).

I really do think that the bureaucrats and people who make the decisions are being advised by people who don't really understand what is going on. There are very few people in government who have been through the agony of poverty. It's because people in poverty don't have the opportunity for an education, to go through the different steps to become a bureaucrat and be able to make some of these decisions. So for the most part I'm not saying 100 percent, but I would say 99 percent of the people who are making these decisions have never been poor. They've never known what it's like to go hungry. They've never lived in a ghetto or a barrio, even though they try to legislate to help these people. It's appreciated, and if it wasn't for them we probably wouldn't be this far in legislating, if you will, morality.

I really do wish that they would come out and live here. Try it. Then they could really write some good legislation, because then they would really know what it's all about. Maybe some of the legislators, themselves, know, because they come from a different point of

reference than the people in government making decisions who are not legislators. I think the advisers that the elected people hire are the ones who should really know what it's like.

Especially in the old days, nobody came from a barrio. They mostly came from agricultural areas or were attorneys or businessmen who got elected. And while they might have been poor growing up or might have been poor farmers, it was a long time before anybody was elected with a really liberal philosophy to help generate some of the liberal legislation that we've had in the last twenty or thirty years.

VASQUEZ: Given the liberal reforms and the program of the Brown administration, why did it take so long for California to elect a [Assemblywoman] Gloria Molina or a [Assemblyman] Richard [J.] Alatorre to the assembly?

SOTO: Well, if you remember, the district in which Gloria won was a new one in 1974. That came about because of the redistricting of 1972. While there were a lot of Democrats, the thought of having that kind of representation in the assembly rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. I

think the people who were voting in those days-- let's date it prior to the sixties--never really gave a lot of thought to "taxation without representation," if you will. "There has to be a minority in the assembly." Those things were never really thought of. I think most of the trend started with the law in 1958, when the right-to-work initiative¹ was put on the ballot. The right-to-work people lost and the unions won. That's when the liberal era began and the pendulum swung way over to the left. If it hadn't been for that, there probably wouldn't have been legislation that did attempt to legislate morality.

[End Tape 2, Side A]

[Begin Tape 2, Side B]

VASQUEZ: Why did we have the "no capital punishment" movement in California?

SOTO: The Democratic party did not believe in capital punishment. That was the Democratic position in those days.

¹. The right-to-work measure appeared on the November 1958 ballot as Proposition 18.

VASQUEZ: When did that pendulum, do you think, reach its apex on the left, reach its high point?

SOTO: I think it started going the other way in the late sixties to early seventies.

VASQUEZ: Before or after Ronald Reagan got into office?

SOTO: Well, I think the effects of liberal legislation started to take hold right before Ronald Reagan got elected to the governor's office.

VASQUEZ: What are some of the indicators in your mind?

SOTO: Well, people didn't want the Rumford Act. The Rumford Act was voted down. People voted against it! Fair housing! The state supreme court said it's unconstitutional to vote down a fair housing situation, so the fair housing law stood.

VASQUEZ: But you feel people still made their . . .

SOTO: I think that had a lot to do with it. I think that cramming legislation down people's throats who were really against what that legislation stood for started them to think, "Maybe we shouldn't be electing these guys with a Soto name or some kind of name other than a nice Anglo-Saxon name."

VASQUEZ: Are you saying you think the reaction against the Rumford Fair Housing Act brought a reaction

against minority and non-white candidates?

SOTO: Well, I think in some areas it did.

VASQUEZ: Was this the case in Soto's area?

SOTO: Not so much. I think that that had a lot to do with the way the district was reapportioned. I think it had to do with Reagan's popularity. A lot of people don't believe this, but the top of the ticket has a lot to do with what results.

Look at the case of [Lieutenant Governor Leo T.] McCarthy where there is a Republican governor and a Democratic lieutenant governor. In some instances, it doesn't work. It doesn't help any. But, for the most part, it usually does. Look at what happened with [President James E.] Carter.

In this district, we had a really good congressman. His name is [James F.] Jim Lloyd. Really nice guy, best congressman you could ever want. Good union vote, good civil rights, everything that you would want in a good representative. An area like this needs a representative that really cares about the people who are in the streets sleeping under the oleanders by the tracks. We have that here. But nobody is doing

anything about it. This guy cared. He was defeated when Carter lost to Reagan, yet he was a popular congressman. Reagan's popularity was so strong that he just swept the nation, he swept in a lot of Republicans, even as president.

VASQUEZ: What is it about Ronald Reagan that made his appeal so great, both at the state level and at the national level, do you think?

SOTO: I think people are very gullible. The average person doesn't really think about the consequences of having a person like Ronald Reagan in office. He's very dangerous, in my opinion. I think it's really dangerous to have a person who makes a joke out of serious issues.

VASQUEZ: Why is it dangerous?

SOTO: I have run into senior citizens who have suffered the consequences of their social security checks being reduced and who still love Ronald Reagan. Because they don't think, they don't realize that electing a president with that kind of philosophy really does have an impact on you. They don't understand it.

VASQUEZ: How do you think the California electorate has been swayed over the years to elect assemblymen

or state senators who may not have been of the best caliber? Because of this shallowness that you mention?

SOTO: Well, I think the boob tube has had a lot to do with it.

VASQUEZ: Television?

SOTO: Sure. You put on a good program and everybody swears by it. This may sound a little radical to you, but I think television has a lot of influence on the way people think.

Look at [Senator Pete] Wilson's ads, the way they were attacking [Leo] McCarthy! McCarthy doesn't do any of the things that the Wilson ads are saying, but people believe it because it's on television.

VASQUEZ: When your husband was in office, you were very active. And, of course, you've continued to be active. But you were first active during the time television emerged as a political force, as a primary conduit to the political electorate. What impact do you think it has had?

SOTO: Well, I think that it helped [John F.] Kennedy.

VASQUEZ: That's something you consider positive?

SOTO: Oh, yes, I think it helped. Again, people voted

for Kennedy because he was good-looking. He had charisma, he spoke well, he said a lot of beautiful things, but I really don't think Kennedy was that good of a president, to be honest with you. I liked it because he was a Democrat.

VASQUEZ: Why do you think he wasn't such a good president?

SOTO: Well, he only had two and a half years. A lot of the ideas that he had and a lot of the legislation he wanted to implement, [President] Lyndon Johnson became the father of. But they were Kennedy's ideas. For that matter, they might have been [Robert F.] Bobby Kennedy's ideas. Because they used to discuss their philosophy and it would become proposed legislation.

VASQUEZ: In your lifetime, who was your idea of a good president?

SOTO: A good president? I think Harry Truman was a good president.

VASQUEZ: Why?

SOTO: He was very honest, pragmatic, and came to the point. There was no bullshit with him.

VASQUEZ: He wasn't a very popular president.

SOTO: That's okay. That's why he wasn't, because he was not a bullshitter. I don't know why it is,

and I ask myself this, but I wonder why people are so gullible that they would believe those who like to prevaricate, exaggerate, and paint a pretty picture of whatever it is. If the truth were known, the real picture wouldn't be as pretty as painted. As a consequence of that, that person might not be that popular.

I'll give you a good example. There's a councilman [C.L.] Clay Bryant here in town who spends all his time in city hall. He scrutinizes the budget. He goes over every item, and he sees everything that's happening in city hall. People go to him for help. If you need something done at city hall, you go to him. But the staff and those who look at things through rose-colored glasses can't stand him because he has an affinity and a penchant for telling the truth. The truth sometimes has an ugly way of rearing its head as cynicism.

VASQUEZ: And people don't want to deal with it?

SOTO: People don't want to deal with that. They would rather hear something that's flowered and pretty. It's kind of like an ostrich: as long as you don't see it, it's not there. You may

think that what I'm saying sounds cynical and negative, but I look at it as being realistic.

VASQUEZ: It has become the conventional wisdom that anyone who really wants to become a serious candidate for president these days, or even [United States] senator, dare not talk about the national debt or any of the serious budgetary problems.

SOTO: Well, that's why Reagan got elected. And that's why I'm afraid that [Vice President George] Bush may get elected. Everything is coming up roses right now, as far as Bush is concerned.

VASQUEZ: What does it portend for the country if that continues?

SOTO: I think that is the road that's leading us to further debt and further decadence. As long as the electorate fails to face reality, we're going to go deeper into the hole of inflation, decadence, the things that destroy a society. Again, that sounds as if I'm bitter, cynical, and hostile, but it isn't really the case. I think I'm just being very realistic and honest.

I'm very concerned about what is going to happen to this country under the leadership of a drug-infested society. I see a president whose

wife [Nancy Reagan] is advocating "Just say 'no' to drugs," a "war on drugs," yet the president is working with those furnishing the drugs for this country.

VASQUEZ: Who would that be?

SOTO: The [Nicaraguan] Contras. It's been in the papers. Doesn't that concern you? Doesn't it concern people that's happening? Isn't that cause for something to be done?

VASQUEZ: Some argue that what has happened to American politics at the national level and at the state level is that they have become too professionalized. The amateur lawmaker who once had very little to lose by telling the truth now has become a professional politician who has everything to lose by not painting a rosy picture. Do you agree with that scenario?

SOTO: Yes, I agree. There are those of us who say [Councilman] Clay [Bryant] won't get reelected [to the Pomona city council] because of his penchant for telling the truth, because he's very intelligent. He is probably the smartest, most intelligent person on the council. Very articulate, very eloquent, and he knows what he's

talking about. But the people can't stand him because, goddammit, he tells the truth all the time. That really rubs them the wrong way. It's just something people can't take.

It's the same thing with Reagan. They love him. "Everything's coming up roses. We're living in the best part of the entire history of our country." Don't say anything about the drugs that are nearly killing all of our youth, about the crime in the neighborhoods.

VASQUEZ: But, in fact, drugs are the primary issue that this candidate of the Republican party [George Bush] wants to talk about.

SOTO: Then why doesn't he proclaim what he's going to do about it?

VASQUEZ: Do you think that campaign rhetoric generalizes and glosses but doesn't get into issues?

SOTO: Sure.

VASQUEZ: What happens to a democracy when political discourse becomes a series of slogans rather than addressing contextual and profound kinds of issues?

SOTO: Its decadence and destruction, its self-destruction.

VASQUEZ: Getting back to your own political experience.

Mr. Soto lost in '66, then he lost again in '68 by an even larger margin. Then [in 1974] he ran again in another district in East Los Angeles. Assess that campaign for me, will you?

SOTO: The Fifty-sixth [Assembly District]?

VASQUEZ: Yes, in the Fifty-sixth Assembly District.

SOTO: Well, there are a lot of people who have a lot of faith in Phil. He's a good, honest, easygoing, kindhearted man, very methodical in what he does and cautious. But most of all, he is very, very loyal to his friends, and I think that's what caused him to run. People who thought he should be back in the assembly convinced him that he could win that district.

VASQUEZ: Who were some of these people?

SOTO: Some East L.A. friends. I can't remember who they were. Some old-timers, Abe Tapia, for one. Somebody by the name of Vince [Rubalcava]. There was a group who even took up a collection to pay his filing fee, because they really had a lot of faith in him.

At the time there were rumors and gossip about [Assemblyman Richard J.] Alatorre and

[Senator Art] Torres being very close, of Torres being Alatorre's choice for that district. The group that was helping Phil, I heard them say, "Why should we let Torres have it without a fight? Why don't you run? Because you can win, you've been there before," blah, blah, blah.

VASQUEZ: What were the differences? Ideological? Philosophical?

SOTO: Not even philosophical, because both belonged to the same party, good Democrats, same nationality. I just think it was mostly personality. People who were supporting Phil probably didn't like Torres. Phil had nothing against Torres, neither did I. But I knew that since Alatorre was already in office and because they were good friends, he [Alatorre] would be the one to get him [Torres] the money, get him the help. So I wasn't very enthusiastic about Phil running in the Fifty-sixth [District]. As a matter of fact, I advised him against it.

VASQUEZ: Were there ever any charges of carpetbagging?

SOTO: No. There never were. He wasn't carpetbagging. We had an apartment in East L.A. As a matter of fact, my son had it. I remember that there wasn't

any charge of carpetbagging. For one thing, we've never really left East L.A., we've always been active there. We both worked in East L.A. at the time. I worked over on Indiana [Street] and Whittier [Boulevard], and he worked over on First [Street] and Soto [Street]. So we had never really left East L.A. like you leave a place completely and then come back. That I remember, I never heard any charges of carpetbagging.

VASQUEZ: Then what made the difference?

SOTO: I think it was money more than anything, because he [Soto] couldn't raise any money. Alatorre was very popular, very, very popular. And the people voted for whomever Alatorre was supporting. It was as simple as that. There wasn't any big, mysterious reason. You didn't need a third eye to see the handwriting.

I just felt really sorry for Phil, Abe, and the other guys, some old-timers that had been working with Phil. All together they were struggling and fighting and doing precinct work, looking for money to help win the campaign. I felt a lot of compassion for them because they really believed in Phil and wanted him to go back

to the assembly.

VASQUEZ: One of the supporters--or at least, one of the images--that Torres was most successful in employing in his successful campaign was the United Farm Workers [of America, AFL-CIO] and César Chávez. Yet your husband was very instrumental in supporting the farm workers.

SOTO: Man, if you don't think that pissed me off! To me, that had to be the biggest chicken shit--excuse me--type of politics I ever saw in my life. Phil was the only Chicano--did you hear me?--the only Chicano legislator that marched with César all the way from Delano. Governor [Edmund G.] Brown [Sr.] didn't even stay in town. The great liberal Pat Brown fled to Palm Springs that Easter Sunday! When they finally arrived at the steps of the capitol, Phil was the one who was there, the only one who was there. And then that sonuvabitch [Chávez] endorses and supports somebody who was still wet behind the ears.

VASQUEZ: Have you reconciled yourself to that?

SOTO: No, you know, I never really have. I can't abide anybody who does anything to Phil, because he has to be the most kindhearted, good person I have

ever met in my life. He's my best friend, and he doesn't deserve bad treatment from anybody. If they had treated me badly, I would have understood it, because I'm a bitch. But I don't understand why people would be mean to Phil. I really don't understand.

VASQUEZ: Do you think he belonged in politics?

SOTO: No, I really don't. I really don't think he did, because he could never strike back.

VASQUEZ: Do you think one has to be able to do that to be successful in politics?

SOTO: Yes.

VASQUEZ: It's a difficult question, perhaps an unfair question, but of all the lessons that you learned in your political experiences to date, which stands out most in your mind?

SOTO: Of all the lessons I've learned?

VASQUEZ: About politics, either as a woman, as a wife of a politician, or as a principal player.

SOTO: Always keep your back to the wall.

[End Tape 2, Side B]